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ABSTRACT

Many schools today emphasize parent involvement without having a clear understanding of what it means. A survey of parents and teachers in an inner city elementary school was conducted as a needs assessment, focusing on the school's existing strengths and weaknesses in order to plan better parent involvement programs. The assessment covered school involvement, personal involvement, parent attitudes, and teacher attitudes and practices. Fifty parent surveys were collected in total (10 per grade K-4). Findings for the personal parent involvement part of the survey were that all parents knew the name of their child's teacher and what their child did for homework the night before; 98 percent claimed to know what their child was doing in school; and 60 percent said they knew their child's classmates' names. Findings for parental school involvement included that 50 percent always attend parent-teacher conferences, 50 percent never volunteer in their child's classroom, 52 percent do not attend class trips, and 36 percent never attend Parent Association meetings. Comments indicated that many parents felt the association was interested only in making money for unclear purposes. Concerning parent attitudes, most parents found such programs as parent-teacher conferences, parent education workshops, parent participation in curriculum planning, and school outreach meetings to be important; the majority also found their child's teacher to be friendly, supportive, actively involved in their child's learning, and respectful of their child's needs. Of 20 teachers surveyed, somewhat more than half found parents to be supportive, non-confrontational, and concerned about their child's education, and 75 percent felt the school was parent-friendly. Most communicated with parents by letter rather than phone, and most did not like parent volunteers in the classroom, admitting that past negative experiences color their current perceptions of parents as volunteers. (EV)

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Parents and Teachers: Advocates or Adversaries

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Parents and Teachers: Advocates or Adversaries

A survey was conducted to address the lack of parental and teacher involvement in an inner city elementary school. Parents and teachers discussed their attitudes and practices towards parental involvement. The survey identified the needs, wants and recommendations of parents and teachers in the practice of parental involvement.

There are many schools today that are emphasizing parent involvement without knowing what it really means to them. Often schools feel that by sending home numerous newsletters and memos that they are fostering parent involvement. Parent involvement goes beyond parents reading newsletters, participating in candy sales and signing homework assignments. Parents as well as teachers need to become involved, together, to foster the importance of education in school as well as in the home. Too often parents are blamed for not being involved even though the teachers are not reaching out to them to foster involvement.

Being a new teacher in an inner city elementary public school has opened my eyes to the lack of parental and teacher involvement. I walk into the teacher's room or the main office and hear teachers and staff complaining about the parents that do not "care" about their children's education or well being daily. I also hear parents at morning line-up and afternoon dismissal complaining that their child's teacher does not listen or respect them as a parent. I can understand both situations as an observer and participant. Too often parents and teachers do not take into consideration each others' needs and beliefs about good educational practices. Teachers and parents inability to work with one another shows that we have a long way to go in education. We need to bring involvement to where it belongs, to the forefront of a school's goal and vision in education.

Teachers are not formally trained to deal with the parents and families of their students (Brand, 1996, p.76). Teachers are however, expected to know how to deal with different types of parents in all situations. There is no handbook given to them to explain the intricacies of dealing with the different attitudes and beliefs of the parents they deal with on a daily basis. Teachers often learn to deal with parents by talking with other teachers and taking cues from their administrators. Teachers most often are not aided in getting parents involved.

Parents also lack the know how to deal with teachers on a daily basis. Parents often feel that they are on the outside looking in on their child's education. They sometimes feel that they are not able to communicate effectively and therefore shy away from discussing a concern or problem. Other parents are very vocal and outspoken about their needs and want for their child and are seen as troublemakers. Parents often are unsure on how to approach a teacher and discuss what is on their mind. They do not want to seem too laid back or too over bearing. "It is not unusual for parents to have ideas and values that differ from the teachers' and there are few who will challenge a teacher's competence" (Brand, 1996, p.76).

In my school there is a great lack of parental and teacher involvement with one another. Teachers and parents range from very involved to no involvement. I see daily the need for a turn around in parent involvement. It frustrates me to see parents and teachers so upset with one another. The animosity that is prevalent between teacher and parent carries over into a student's concept of school. As Brand states, parents and teachers often view each other with a "what can you do for me" (1996, p.79) attitude.

Students are being placed in the middle of a tough situation and we as educators and parents need to address it.

In order to address the lack of parental involvement and begin a school wide program in my school, a need's assessment must be completed. A needs assessment will enable us to focus on our strengths and weaknesses before a program is implemented. These assessments will focus on the following areas: school involvement, personal involvement, parent attitudes, teacher attitudes and practices as described by Grolnick et al. (1997 p. 540-542).

School Involvement

Parent involvement in school activities on a daily basis should be assessed to get a better understanding of what areas draw parent response. In doing so a school can assess what areas need improvement and what areas are a strong parent draw (Comer and Haynes, 1991, p.271).

Also, assessment of areas that the parents find important and worthwhile should be taken to understand where parents want involvement to focus.

Personal Involvement

An assessment of parents personal involvement with their child and school will enable us to see the level of knowledge the parents have of their child's life at school.

Family backgrounds need to be evaluated to understand what the parents and families are dealing with outside of school. Schools often disregard what goes on outside of school when a link between the two is necessary for a good school and family connection (Grolnick et al., 1997, p.546).

Parent Attitudes

Parent attitudes towards teachers need to be evaluated to understand what parents dislike and like about the teachers they are dealing with. Too often teachers assume the parent is the problem when they do not address their own misgiving in relation to parent involvement (Grolnick et al., 1997, p.547). Parents also expect a teacher to be one way and when their expectations are not met they feel slighted.

Parent attitudes in relation to parent involvement programs will also be addressed.

Teacher Attitudes and Practices

A teacher's attitude towards the parents he/she is dealing with color how a teacher feels about those parents and their involvement as a whole (Epstein and Dauber, 1991, p. 297). Teachers need to address on how they see the parents of their students. If a teacher carries resentment towards parents due to a lack of parental involvement in the past that lack of involvement hinders upon the success of future parent involvement. If parents are made to feel unnecessary in their child's education a teacher is not doing his or her job successfully. Most parents want to understand and gain knowledge in areas of education to feel that they are productive and involved in their child's schooling.(Epstein and Dauber, 1991, p.290).

The areas to be assessed in this study were chosen to get an overall sense of where parents and teachers stand on their beliefs and practices concerning parent involvement. I do not think a good parent involvement program can be achieved without first doing the groundwork. Too often programs are started and not followed through because of a lack of background knowledge. I have seen this happen first hand and that is why I am so

interested in evaluating and assessing my own school. I truly believe that in order for a program to be successful parents must feel involved from the beginning. As Herrera stated, "the primary point is that parents become involved in their children's education at school when they know that their opinions are important to the school and will be considered in making decisions effecting children's schooling" (1988, p.80).

Parental Assessment

In order to get a needs assessment of parent involvement I formulated a parent survey. I gave out the surveys to two classes per grade, grades K-4. I personally handed out the surveys, randomly, to five students in each class. I spoke with each teacher and the participating students about the purpose of the survey being given out. I asked for their cooperation in seeing that surveys are returned. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey to the parents was also included with the survey.

Fifty parent surveys were collected in total, ten per grade. Seventy per cent of respondents were full-time, working parents, of which 54% were married. Also, 12% of the working parents were college students.

Of the fifty parents surveyed, 50% of parents had two children, 36% had three children, 8% had four children and 6% had one child. The age range of the parents were as follows: 46% were 25-30, 14% were 30-35, 26% were 35-40, 8% were 40-45 and 6% were 45+.

Parental Personal Involvement

Of the fifty parents surveyed 100% new their child's teachers name and what his or her child did for homework the night before. Sixty per cent of parents did know and 40%

did not know their child's classmates names. Lastly, 98% of parents surveyed knew what their child was currently doing in school, while only 2% did not know.

Parents stated that they felt all of the questions asked related to personal involvement were important and necessary for each parent to think about. Several parents stated that they really had to think about the names of their child's classmates. Parents also felt that in order for a child to do well in school a parent must know, personally, about what happen daily at school.

Parental School Involvement

Parents were asked to identify how often they attend parent/teacher conferences. Fifty per cent of parents said they always attend, 10% often attend, 12% sometimes attend, 12% seldom attend and 16% never attend. Parents that attend conferences felt that the conference time allows them to get to know the teachers and to get a progress update on their children. Parents stated that work and family obligations often keep them from attending conferences, even though they would like to attend.

Parents identified how often they volunteered in their child's class. Of the fifty parents surveyed, 16% always volunteer, 2% often volunteer, 10% sometimes volunteer, 12% seldom volunteer and 50% never volunteer.

Parents identified how often they attend class trips. Twelve per cent of parents surveyed always attend, 14% often attend, 10% sometimes attend, 12% seldom attend and 52% never attend class trips.

Parents that do not volunteer in class or on trips stated that they are unable to do so because of work or family obligations. Some parents stated that if they attend class trips it is for safety reasons.

Lastly, parents identified how often they attend Parent Association meetings. Results showed that 8% of parents always attend, 26% often attend, 8% sometimes attend, 22% seldom attend and 36% never attend. Parents stated that the reason they don't attend is because they are not regularly informed of the dates and times. Many feel the Parents Association is only interested in "collecting candy money and selling trinkets" to make money. They would not mind helping out, but they say they never see what the money is used for.

Program Importance

Of the fifty parents surveyed 100% felt that parent/teacher conferences were important. Eighty-six per cent of parents felt open communication between parents, teachers and administration was important whereas 14% felt it was somewhat important. Parents stated that they attend conferences to check on their child's growth, behavior and to learn about the areas that are in need of improvement. Also, many feel the conferences allow them to have privacy and confidentiality when discussing their child. Parents felt that conferences give them an opportunity to get to know their child's teacher one-to-one and to experience their child's learning environment.

Parent workshops on nutrition and discipline were important to 86% of surveyed parents and 14% did not. Eighty-four per cent of parents felt parent workshops in which

they would learn to tutor their child at home were important. Twelve per cent felt they were somewhat important and 4% felt they were not important.

In assessing the need for parent G.E.D., reading and job skills classes 76% of parents found them to be important, 20% found them somewhat important and 4% felt them not important.

The majority of parents stated that parent workshops of all types are important for parents for they can always learn new ways to help their children. But, they felt that in order for programs to work they need to be presented to the parents in a motivational way to get them to participate. The parents that did not see the workshops as important felt that schools were not responsible for teaching the parents, that they need to concentrate on the children.

Curriculum planning was found important by 62% of parents, 28% somewhat important and 10% not important. Parent involvement in curriculum planning was seen as important because such planning "could only benefit" the school. Others felt curriculum planning by parents could be biased based on a parents concerns and interests for his or her own child.

Eighty-eight per cent of parents found school and community outreach meetings important, 10% felt them somewhat important and 2% found them not important. Community outreach was seen as important by the parents because it would allow the parents and community to be heard. Many parents felt that teachers need to attend these meeting s for a better understanding of where parents are coming from and to make a stronger connection to the community in which they teach.

Parent Attitudes Toward Teachers

In assessing parent attitudes on teachers, 94% found their child's teacher friendly and 6% did not. One-hundred per cent of parents found teachers supportive and caring. One-hundred per cent of parents found teachers to be actively involved with their child. One-hundred percent of parents felt teachers take time to speak with them. Sixty-six per cent of parents felt their child's teachers like parent volunteers and 34% did not. Ninety-eight per cent of parents found their child's teacher to be respectful of their child's individual needs and 2% did not.

Majority of parents found their child's teacher to be friendly, supportive, actively involved and respectful of their child's needs. Parents stated that teachers often took their time to speak with them and listen to all of their ideas and concerns. Teachers worked with parents and even had parents come to class to work with their child.

Parents that stated that their child's teacher liked parent volunteers say active volunteering as something besides working in the classroom. Parents volunteered their time by Xeroxing, sending in materials and providing ideas to the teachers for cultural studies.

Teacher Assessment

To get an assessment of teacher attitudes and practices concerning parental involvement a teacher survey was conducted. The twenty classroom teachers whose class parents participated in the parent survey were asked to complete the teacher survey. Teachers were given an overview of the survey and were asked to complete it in two weeks.

Teacher Background

Years' of teaching experience were averaged by teachers with the following results. 30% have 1-3 years, 10% have 3-5 years, 20% have 5-10 years, 15% have 10-20 years and 25% have 20+ years. The varied years of experience will enable me to see if there are any differences between new and veteran teachers when it comes to parent involvement.

Teacher Attitudes of Parents

Of the twenty teachers surveyed, 60% found parents to be supportive of them and 40% did not. Forty-five per cent of teachers felt parents to be confrontational and 55% did not. When it came to schoolwork, 70% of teachers feel that parents care about schoolwork and their child's education, whereas 30% do not. When it comes to homework, 55% of teachers feel that parents help their child with homework and 45% do not. The twenty teachers surveyed also felt that 40% of parents don't listen to their input, whereas 60% do not. Lastly, 75% of teachers felt that the school is parent friendly and 25% did not.

Teachers found parents supportive when they followed up on teacher suggestions, enforced homework and emphasized appropriate school behavior. Teachers felt that those parents that are confrontational do no take the time to see both sides of a situation. They are stressed with life or lack the ability to speak to teachers. They admit that school can be very intimidating to parents at times, which causes tension. Many teachers stated how frustrated they were with homework procedures. Some say too many parents are not

helping their children due to their lack of time or that the homework is too difficult at times.

The 75% of teachers who saw the school as parent friendly felt that the school catered to parents and not to teachers. Others felt that the staff, parent association and administration worked well together to make the school a friendly place. Also, teachers that did not see the school as parent friendly stated that there seems to be no connection between parent and teachers. Too often parents and teachers complain silently about the lack of friendliness at the school, but never speak to be heard.

Teacher Parent Involvement Practices

At the completion of the survey it was found that 40% of the teacher participants communicate positive behavior by phone and 60% do not. Eighty per cent of teachers surveyed say they communicate positive behavior by letter and 20% do not. Negative behavior is communicated by phone by 55% of teachers and 45% do not. Also negative behavior is communicated by letter by 80% of teachers, whereas 20% do not.

Concerning positive behavior, teachers stated how much communicating positive behavior on a daily basis is crucial to a child's success in school. When phoning or writing to a parent about positive or negative concerns, it is necessary to be positive about school behavior and work. On the other hand, teachers stated that parent must be aware of any continuous negative behavior. Parents did stress, however, the need for patience with students when it comes to making negative comments. Many felt that often teachers send more negative comments than positive. Most teachers emphasized the need for a more positive approach by themselves and their school as a whole.

In speaking with parents, most teachers felt it is necessary to give as much time to listen and to speak with parents about concerns or suggestions. They also stated how just taking a bit of time to speak with parents can benefit the education of students. As one teacher stated so strongly about communication, "Every little bit helps."

Parent volunteers are liked by 30% of teachers and 70% do not like them. Thirty per cent of teachers will speak to parents by appointment only whereas 70% will speak to parents before, during and after school.

As far as volunteering by parents goes, many teachers said they realized by taking this survey that they do not involve parents as volunteers in their classroom. The overall reason given for this was that the administration does not welcome parent into the classrooms, even though they saw the school as parent friendly.

Lastly, 65% of teachers survey found that past negative parent involvement's have affected their current parent interactions and 35% do not. The majority of teachers admitted that their negative past parent experiences have colored their current ones. Overwhelming amounts of teachers stated how they are very cautious when they speak to parents. On the other hand, teachers stated that they have become more open to parental involvement and are far more positive about it due to past experiences.

Conclusion

A needs assessment of a school's parent and teacher involvement is crucial to the success of a school. If parents do not feel they are a part of the school community then a school cannot be successful. In order to prevent parents from feeling uninvolved a school

must "gather information to create a profile of present practices and a coherent plan of action to improve practices in the future" (Epstein and Dauber, 1991, p.304).

This survey gave me and my school staff and administration a better understanding of how teachers and parents feel about involvement. I learned that the majority of the parents I surveyed are happy with their child's classroom teacher. Teachers are being observed as supportive and caring, when most of the time teachers only hear the negative comments. This told me that all parents should be surveyed to get a deeper understanding of how parents view teachers. I think that if teachers knew how parents felt about them, as a whole, teachers would work better with parents and their ability to deal with them will improve. Many teachers felt that parents were involved and were looking out for their child's best interest, even if they were confrontational.

Teachers also emphasized that parents should always by praised for their commitment to their child's school and education. Also, parents should be informed on how to become better involved in their child's school. If parents were better informed and involved about school involvement practices then the school will get stronger in its commitment to family (Epstein and Dauber, 1991, p.292).

Parent/Teacher Recommendations for Implementing Parent/School Connections

Parents and teachers shared the following recommendations for beginning the parent and school connection. They were given an opportunity to openly communicate their ideas to help the school start a good parent/teacher program.

1. A school wide parent/teacher/administration parent involvement assessment.
2. Teacher meetings on a monthly basis to discuss parent issues. Teachers will be

able to have round table discussions to learn ideas on how to deal with parents. For new and veteran teachers.

3. Formulating school and parent involvement goals for the whole school. Make parent involvement a school wide priority.
4. Hold school and community meetings monthly. These meeting will address concerns, issues and school programs. Meetings should be held with parents, teachers and administration.

Closing

I would like to close by saying how surprised I was with many of the results of the survey. What I have found most satisfying are the discussions, stimulated be the surveys, that have been started amongst teachers and parents alike. I am constantly getting feedback and requests for more information on parent/school connections from both parents and teachers.

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